

The Lessons of the “March Action”



The Lessons of the “March Action”—Gorter’s Last Letter to Lenin

Dear Comrade Lenin:

When we last parted in November of 1920, your last words on our quite divergent ideas concerning revolutionary tactics in Western Europe were to the effect that neither your opinions nor mine had been sufficiently tested; that experience would soon prove which of the two is correct.

We were in complete agreement on that.

Now, reality has unfolded and we possess more than one experience. You will undoubtedly allow me to show you, from my point of view, the lessons we should learn.

You will recall that, at the Moscow Congress, you yourself, along with the Executive Committee of the Third International, declared your support for parliamentarism, for infiltrating the trade unions and for participating in the legal industrial councils in Germany, the only country in Europe where the revolution has actually taken place.

The Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD) and the Dutch Marxists responded by maintaining that your tactics would lead to an extreme enervation of the revolution, to chaos among the proletariat, to discouragement among the communists, and thus to the most disastrous defeats. On the other hand, antiparlamentarism, factory organizations, workers unions and their revolutionary action committees would lead, in Germany and in Western Europe, to the strengthening of the revolution and finally to the unification of the proletariat.

You—and with you, the Executive Committee of the Third International—intend to unite the masses under your political and trade union leadership regardless of whether or not they are truly communist. This is what you did at Tours, Florence, and Halle. Your objective was to provide these masses with new bosses.

We want to destroy the old organizations and to build others of a new kind, from the bottom up, which are animated by a new mentality. We do not want anyone but true communists to join us in this endeavor.

You wanted to export Russian tactics to Western Europe, tactics from a country where capitalism was weak and where you had the peasants as collaborators.

We took account of the fact that, in Western Europe, the proletariat stands alone against a gigantic capitalism, which has at its disposal financial credit and raw materials. And therefore that we needed our own tactics, different from yours.



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You want the dictatorship of the party, that is, of a few leaders. We want a class dictatorship.

You practice a leadership politics. And we practice a class politics.

Your tactics are basically a continuation of the tactics of the Second International. Nothing has changed but the external façade, the names, and the slogans. Essentially, you still belong (in Western Europe and Russia) to the old school from before the revolution.

The German proletariat's 1921 March Action has proven which side is right: you, comrade Lenin, and the Executive Committee of the Third International; or the KAPD and the Dutch Marxists who supported the KAPD. The March Action has provided an answer and has demonstrated that the leftists were correct.

There were two parties in Germany, each with its own tactics, both participating in the movement. The Communist Party of Germany followed your tactics; the Communist Workers Party of Germany followed its own tactics, which are also our tactics as well. What was the outcome, how did these parties behave during the March Action?

(Is it not always necessary, especially in the present case, that tactics, principles and theory find their justification in action?)

The Communist Party, through its parliamentary activity which only voiced the masses'

disappointment with a bankrupt capitalism, diverted the proletariat away from revolutionary action. It managed to unite hundreds of thousands of non-communists, and became a mass party. With its infiltration tactics it has become a bulwark of the trade unions and with its participation in the legal industrial councils it has betrayed the revolutionaries and weakened the revolution. By doing all these things, Comrade Lenin, the Communist Party has only been following your advice, your tactics, and the tactics of the Executive Committee of the Third International. And when, as a consequence of these policies, it repeatedly collapsed into inactivity (during the Warsaw offensive, for example), or into treason when faced with the prospect of action (the Kapp Putsch), when by means of simulated actions and a raucous publicity it becomes reformist, constantly passing the buck whenever it can when faced with the struggle which the capitalists wish to force upon the workers (for example: the electrical workers strike in Hamburg, the strikes at Ambi and Leuna, etc.), in short, when the German revolution was on the decline into regression and enfeeblement, the best elements in the KPD

began to demand, with increasing ardor, to be led into action—then, all at once, the Communist Party of Germany decided upon a great undertaking with the intention of conquering political power.

Here is what this plan consisted of: in the face of provocation by Horsing and the Sipo, the KPD decided upon a gradual, superficial, hierarchically-ordered action, without the spontaneous impulse of the masses; in other words, it adopted the tactic of the putsch.

The Executive Committee and its representatives in Germany had already been insisting for some time that the Communist Party, by committing all of its forces, should prove that it was really a revolutionary party. As if the essential aspect of a revolutionary tactic consisted solely of committing all one's forces. . . . On the contrary, when, instead of fortifying the revolutionary power of the proletariat, a party undermines this power by means of its support for parliament and the trade unions, and then, after such preparations (!) it suddenly decides on action and

puts itself at the head of the same proletariat whose strength it had been undermining, throughout this entire process it cannot ask itself whether it is engaged in a putsch, that is, an action decreed from above, which did not originate among the masses themselves, and is consequently doomed to failure. This putsch attempt is by no means revolutionary; it is just as opportunist as parliamentarism or the tactic of infiltrating cells of party members into all kinds of groups.

This putschist tactic is the inevitable obverse of parliamentarism and infiltration, of the recruitment of non-communist elements, of the replacement of mass or class tactics by leadership tactics. Such politics, weak and internally rotten, must inevitably lead to putsches.

How could the KPD—corrupted by parliamentarism, internally weakened by the dead weight of non-communists, its strength sapped by discord between at least six tendencies and put at the service of a leadership tactic, as opposed to a mass tactic—have led a revolutionary action?

Where could the KPD have found the power it needed to confront an enemy as formidable as German reaction, armed to the teeth? Or to confront Germany's financial and commercial capital, which has successfully formed a bloc of all the classes opposed to communism?

At the time of the Horsing provocation on the part of the government, when a generalized and tenacious resistance became necessary, and when the masses themselves began to rise in central Germany, the KPD, as a result of its internal weakness, was incapable of any kind of effective combat. That was its downfall. At least half of its members remained inactive—in some places they fought among themselves. The reaction won easily.

When the rout began, Levi, your former protégé and standard-bearer—the man who, together with Radek, yourself, and the Executive Committee, is most responsible for the introduction of these debilitating tactics into Germany and Western Europe, of this tactic of the putsch—

this same Levi attacked the KPD fighters from the rear, those who, despite the party's mistaken tactics, had proven to be its most revolutionary elements. As thousands of them were being arraigned before the courts, he denounced them, as well as their leaders. Not only does Levi, with his tactics, bear ample

responsibility for the putsch, but also for the terrible punishments inflicted by the repression. And it is precisely with Levi that Däumig, Geyer, Clara Zetkin and, together with them—a fact of great significance—the whole parliamentary fraction of the party concur.

The Communist Party of Germany thus suffered a devastating blow. And with it, the whole proletariat of Western Europe, the Russian revolution and the world revolution also suffered a setback. The KPD, the only mass communist party in Western Europe, will probably be reduced to nothing. This will probably be the end of the KPD as a revolutionary party.

This party, comrade, has been constructed according to your principles, in a country where economic conditions are ripe for revolution. And when it strikes its first blow, it collapses.

While its bravest militants are dying, being gunned down and filling the prisons, they are betrayed by their own leaders. This is the example set by the KPD and your tactics.

We will now proceed to the other example and the other tactic, those of the KAPD.

The KAPD, which does not want to have anything to do with parliamentarism or the old trade unions, but wants factory organizations, never needed a putschist tactic, which is always a consequence of a lack of internal cohesion. The KAPD does not have to suffer from this lack of internal cohesion, because it only admits communists as members; because, for the KAPD, it is quality that counts; because it does not have a leadership politics, but a class politics; because it does not want a party dictatorship, but a class dictatorship. This is why the question of a putsch cannot even be posed within the KAPD. The KAPD did not pursue a putschist tactic in the March Action. Its tactic is based upon the fact that neither a party nor a party's leadership can make the decision to start a revolution or a major insurrectionary movement, but that only the historical situation itself, that is, the masses' will to fight, must constitute the basis for such decisions. The KAPD's tactic is meant to strengthen the proletariat by developing its consciousness and extending its revolutionary power while constructing effective combat organizations. This, of course, can only be done within the struggle itself, without ever shirking the fight imposed by the enemy or

spontaneously arising from the masses.

This is how the KAPD has always acted, unlike the social democratic, independent and communist parties of Germany. This is how it acted during the Kapp Putsch, the electrical workers strike, the Russian offensive in Poland, and the numerous strikes in Germany, exactly as in the March Action. With this truly revolutionary tactic, arbitrarily ordered actions cannot even take place.

In the March Action, the KAPD only entered the fray after the government attack.

And now, would you like to compare the KAPD with the KPD, both during and after the Action? The Communist Workers Party showed itself to be so firm in its resolve and its tactics that during the Action it suffered from no discord whatsoever, and even after the defeat, the most complete unity prevailed at its delegates' assembly. Despite the defeat, its power was enhanced, as was that of the Workers Union (AAU).

This is the balance sheet of your tactics, those of the Third International, and those of the KAPD.

Comrade Lenin, it is not mere intellectual curiosity which makes me want to probe more deeply into these issues. It is because the tactics of the revolution in Western Europe and of the world revolution as well, depend upon a correct understanding of the problems they pose.

Let us therefore more carefully examine these tactics in detail—your tactics and those of the leftists.

You want parliamentarism. You want to play a role in the theater, behind whose stage the New German State of Stinnes and the Orgesch lies concealed, a theater which lacks any real power. With your methods, the workers have been diverted from the real problems of the revolution, they have been herded (through the elections) into unreliable masses, a part of whom must necessarily fail to rise to the occasion at the decisive moment. With these methods, internal corruption was inevitable.

We are anti-parliamentary. We do not want the fictitious struggle, but the real one. That is why the KAPD remains unanimous and unshakeable.

You want the legal industrial councils. You have advocated them to the workers; you have convinced the workers to recognize these legal councils as organs of the revolution. What role did these legal councils play during the March Action? They abandoned and betrayed the revolutionary action.

We want revolutionary action committees. While the industrial councils remained inactive and practiced their treachery during the March Action, revolutionary action committees spontaneously arose among the masses and drove the movement forward.

You want to influence the trade unions through communist cells. What have these cells accomplished? Have they radicalized the trade unions? There has been no news of their doing anything. They have accomplished nothing. No matter how many times they have infiltrated part of the trade union bureaucracy.

We want factory organizations and the unity of these organizations within the General Workers Union (AAU), because the revolutionary struggle can only be carried out on the terrain of industry and upon the basis of industry. And what has the March Action taught us?

It was fought in the industries and by industries. It was fought by the factory organizations.

The factory organizations, not the trade unions, constituted the focal points of the revolution.

The March Action has therefore supplied the proof that factory organizations are indispensable for the revolution.

The KPD, despite the heroism of a significant number of its combatants, has paralyzed the revolution with its tactics (which are your tactics), with its parliamentarism, its infiltration of other organizations and its legal industrial councils.

The KAPD, the Workers Union and the factory organizations have shown themselves in the eyes of the entire world to be the leaders of the German revolution, that is, of the revolution in Western Europe and the whole world.

You want organization, you get chaos.

You want unity, you get schism.

You want leaders, you get traitors.

You want masses, you get sects.

(It is thus necessary to add yet one more observation: you, comrade Lenin, you, Zinoviev and Radek and so many others in the Third International, you said that the tactics of the KAPD

would only produce sects.)

We see what actually happened.

Your KPD embraces, according to its own figures, 500,000 members. But the KPD also admitted (at its last congress), and everyone knows quite well, that the majority are not communists. Let us assume, however, that half of them are communists. In that case, your tactics and those of the Third International have attracted, out of the nine million trade unionists in Germany, 250,000 communists to your party.

But how many communists are there in the Workers Union (AAU), which was founded on the basis of the principles of the KAPD? A ballpark figure: 250,000. Judged by the numbers, our tactics have therefore been just as successful as yours.

But it is not only in terms of numbers that our tactics reveal their superiority. There is also this difference: first of all, the KPD and its cells have been created by countless millions of marks spent on newspapers, organization and propaganda—the KAPD and the AAU have not cost even one penny. Secondly, the KPD and its cells have collapsed in your hands, while the KAPD and the AAU are solid and flourishing. The KPD and its cells are worm-eaten with internal treachery. The KAPD and the AAU are growing in strength and unity.

Reality has provided us with the following elements of experience: as the March Action of the German proletariat has clearly demonstrated, so we hope that the entire International will recognize that your tactics, those of the Executive Committee and the Comintern, lead to collapse and defeat, while the tactics of the left generate unity and strength.

The Third Congress of the International must therefore modify its tactics.

Comrade Lenin, we admit the adequacy of your tactics for Russia, and personally wish to tell you that the judgment of history, as I see it, concerning your revolutionary efforts as a whole, will proclaim that you have done great work, the best possible. In my view, you are, after Marx and Engels, our most eminent guide. This does not obviate the fact, however, that you are mistaken in respect to the tactics to be employed in Western Europe.

And now, we turn to the German proletariat, and say: “if it is true that you are convinced in your hearts and minds that the left wing is correct, if you are ready to fight in accordance with its methods, then abandon the KPD and all the old parliamentary parties; get out of the trade unions, and join the General Workers Union and the Communist Workers Party”.

And we call upon the whole proletariat of Western Europe and the entire world to adopt our tactics.

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